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THE PRESENT CONDITION OF THE PEASANTS IN THE RUSSIAN EMPIRE.

One need not be an aged man to remember the enthusiasm which greeted the emancipation of the Russian serfs in 1861. The emperor, Alexander II, was magnified as the most philanthropic monarch that had ever directed the destinies of a nation. By all intelligent persons it was considered that the emancipation marked the definitive assimilation of Russia with the other countries of Europe.

The gratitude with which his people regarded their sovereign was fully justified, no less than was the admiration which the whole world lavished upon the Emperor of all the Russias. But it is for what he wished to do, and not for what he did, that he must be judged. No one can doubt that his generous soul most truly desired to summon his millions of serfs to liberty, that his noble heart would reign over men who knew no other master than himself, no other rule than the common law.

It is because emancipation has not brought this result that it in no wise merits the enthusiasm which it awakened. Why not make the statement at once? It has been only a delusion. True, the *seigneurs* have been stripped of their authority, but authority has not ceased to lie heavily upon the peasants; it has changed its name, it has become collective; and from the days of Proudhon to the present time all the world has recognized that there is no greater tyranny than that of collectivity.

Now, in formal terms, the edict of 1861 transferred to the *mir* the power which had previously been exercised by the *seigneurs*. This word, and the system for which it stands, are absolutely new to us. What is the *mir*? Put the question to a Russian, and if he answers you, it is very probable that his reply will not give you much information. Nine times in ten he will say, "The *mir*? The *mir* is the commune."

And in all the countries of the world the commune is a certain extent of territory or a given company of persons inhabiting a portion of land. In Russia, of two neighbors one makes part of the mir, the other makes no part of it. It has to do with the peasants, but not with all of them. And by peasant must be understood, not only the inhabitant of the country, but all the lower classes, all that are not bourgeois or noble. Of these peasants, a very small part (11,000,000 in 40,000,000) are really free. These either were enfranchised before the act of emancipation or they have since released themselves from the obligations which that act imposed upon those whom it professed to liberate. The rest, that is to say twenty-nine millions of Christians, are bound by shackles not different from those that slavery forged for them. In order that the freed serfs might have those means of subsistence which the *seigneur* was now no longer bound to furnish them, at the time of the emancipation there was taken from the *seigneur's* domains a portion larger or smaller according to the number of the liberated serfs. This land was not divided among the serfs; it was given to the mir, to an association, to a collectivity formed of the serfs. To them was left the care of dividing it, and of cultivating it as they chose. There was the single restriction that the parts, if a division had been made, should not be permanent, much less hereditary, to the end that always periodical distributions might thereafter allot a tract to new families or to the *nouveaux venus*. The restriction thus imposed upon the mir constrained it simply to imitate what the *seigneur* had done, for apparently he could never dispossess himself of the obligation of apportioning his lands among his peasants.

The lands thus given stood in lieu of those which the landlord had been accustomed to grant in remuneration for labor performed on other lands. To represent this labor, since a liberatory act could not exact labor from those whom it had freed, the communities were compelled to pay the *seigneurs* such an indemnity as was judged an equivalent for the labor they had received. The payment of the indemnity giving rise

to continual conflict, the State reimbursed the landlords, substituted itself for them, and became the sole creditor of the peasants. It was provided that the debt should be paid in seventy-nine annuities, and that the mir, as a solidarity, should be responsible for the payments, as it had been when the expropriated lands had been received. This, then, is the mir: An assemblage of families holding in common a certain quantity of land, bound to pay annually a certain sum of money, and in order to satisfy these obligations, invested with powers equal, if not superior, to those exercised by the *seigneurs*, their predecessors.

We are to study the conditions under which these associations operate, and their effect, not only upon the peasants, but upon the entire Russian organism; and I trust that the American people will take interest in the study, for the great Republic of the New World cannot but take interest in the great Empire of the Old.

II.

From the point of view of the public wealth the periodic dispossession of the landholder can be but disastrous. With every new partition, occurring as it does about every five years, the peasant finds himself assigned to a new tract. Hence why waste his time and his money in improving it during the period that he holds it? The cultivation in common might have had its advantages, but it requires a social condition far beyond that permitted by the possibilities of the Russian peasant. Without a single exception the land of the mir is divided. A peasant receives by lot a certain number of parcels, almost always separated one from another and always distant from the house which belongs to him in fee. But not only is this land allotted to him in virtue of his right; it represents also the extent of his obligations. Every family receives a number of strips proportional to the number of its active members and in the same proportion must it contribute to the common debt, annual payments, and taxes. In districts in which the land yields a revenue the result is satisfactory;

but in those districts, far more numerous, in which there is no revenue or a revenue which is not sufficient to discharge the debts, the land becomes a burden. At the time of apportionment I have seen the peasants resort to a thousand artifices, and to supplication, too, that less land be given them. One declared that his sick sons could not cultivate the tracts which had been assigned to him; another pleaded advancing age and appealed to the mercy of the apportioners. The chief of the community was inflexible, for the other peasants who stood by would not have tolerated an exemption which resulted in an infraction of their rights. The State, in fact, takes no cognizance of the members of the mir, for it is of the mir itself that it demands the annual payments; hence it is at the expense of all if a peasant would excuse himself from his obligations, and one may understand the rigor which presides at the distribution.

Were not the association endowed with efficient powers, many of its members would release themselves by flight from the duties which the mir creates for them. But the code has made provisions against such a result; in Vol. 9, Art. 703 *et seq.*, thus it regulates the rights and duties of the mir:

“The land shall be divided equitably, the expenses, taxes and annual payments made in solidarity.”

The mir has the power of banishment; it may expel by a decision from which there is no appeal, the member who is offensive to it, granting him the privilege of joining a new mir, but not, by Art. 709, an adjoining one. This ostracism becomes, then, a veritable exile. Art. 712 makes the condition of peasant incompatible with every other condition. The intent of this provision is obvious from the following article, which declares that the mir may order the transportation to Siberia of such of its members as it deems suspicious.

We have seen that the possession of land is often a burden. It is, therefore, of the greatest importance to a mir that an idle member shall not take the place of one who is solvent, industrious and sober. Art. 719 prohibits any cession of portions of land.

If you note the title of the following chapter, "The Liberation of the Peasants," you will grant with me that Art. 724, which I am about to cite, is a model of legislative irony.

It is distinctly stated that any debtor peasant may withdraw from the mir when he chooses to do so, but on the following conditions:

1. He shall abandon his portion of land, as is eminently natural.

2. He shall put himself *en règle* as regards his military service.

3. He shall discharge, both he and his family, every debt, whether it be payable to the mir, to the district or to the commune, and pay the taxes levied for that current year.

4. He shall have no process pending against him.

5. He shall have no judgment against him unsatisfied.

6. He shall have the consent of his parents, no matter what age he may have attained.

7. If he leave children, he shall provide for their maintenance.

8. He shall pay all undivided claims (*redevances afférentes*) on the land which he may have received in fee from the *seigneur*.

9. He shall have the acceptance of another mir, *i. e.* he shall declare that he does not become free, that he does no more than change his prison, that he does not cease to be a serf.

In the last paragraph we might find ample proof, were it necessary, to show that the serfage of the peasant has changed only in form. The first eight provisions might be explained under strict construction by fiscal necessities, but here the law says clearly, "Thou art not free, and of thyself thou canst not be." However, this is but a theoretic consideration. How is it possible for a Russian peasant, the most indolent of beings, the most unlettered, the most suspicious of the scribe and of his art, to secure the nine certificates prescribed by this wonderful article?

Since the annual payments are to be made during only seventy-nine years, it would appear that at the expiration of

that time the proprietorship of lands freed of encumbrance would then become personal. If it had been to the interest of the treasury to establish a solidarity wherever it found a guarantee, why continue the solidarity when the debt shall have been cancelled? It is not thus, however, that the code has made provision.

If a peasant with his labor and his earnings pays his portion of the annuity, a thing, however, which he cannot do, except the mir consent, his share of the common land becomes his personal property and he ceases to be held longer by the common obligations, yet he retains his right to vote in the assemblies.

But if the payments have been made by the mir the lands continue to be its own property and are still cultivated by the community. Again, it often happens that it is not possible for the common domain to furnish support for the associated peasants. If the lands lie at a distance from a city, there will be no commerce and no industries to help the peasants to make for themselves additional resources. They are, then, forced to emigrate, to take advantage of the winter season when the cold prevents agricultural labor and find employment in a large city. But they must first obtain leave of absence from their associates, a permission without which the authorities would check their movements, a permission, too, which may at any time be revoked. Note the result. In 1883 M. de Coutouly, Consul of France at St. Petersburg, had an excellent nurse with whom he was well content. Without awaiting for the time for weaning the child, the mir to which the woman belonged ordered her to return at once, allowing it to be understood, however, that the order would be withdrawn in case M. de Coutouly sent two hundred rubles. He objected, took many steps to defend himself against the injustice, and in the end paid the sum demanded. So it is easily imagined what happens when an industrious and intelligent workman comes to receive large wages; he is recalled immediately, nor can he escape complete ruin without permitting a larger or a smaller sum to be extorted from him.

III.

It is with difficulty than one can believe that this institution has found not only those who defend, but those who applaud it. Yet it is exclaimed: "It is the remedy for social evils!" "The mir makes misery impossible; it checks in its earliest stages the formation of the proletariat. Thanks to it, every laborer, the laborer in the city as well as the laborer in the field, has a roof to shelter him when sickness falls upon him, a parcel of land which will keep him when the years shall have spent his strength. The horrible prospect of death brings no fear to the Russian workman buried in the heart of a great city, away from his parents, away from friends. If he is sick, if old age comes upon him, he sets off for his village and finds there a hearth which is his own, neighbors whose companion he has not ceased to be."

And many another eulogy has been spoken for the mir. The *doctrinaires* themselves have thought they saw in it that primitive form of proprietorship which might become the system of the future. Others, without reflecting that its analogue is to be found in the Kabyle associations, in the Servian communities, in the Slav Zadrouyas, have declared that the mir is a concept of the rulers of 1861 which will suffice for their glory.

Theoretically, a single simple consideration is enough to cause this enthusiasm to subside, for all the advantages which the institution can offer were offered by serfage. Take one by one the eulogies bestowed upon the mir, and they are strictly applicable to the system which preceded it. And it is natural; for the act of emancipation has, I repeat, transferred to the peasant community all the rights and the privileges of the supplanted *seigneurs*. The duties and the rights of the peasants have not, therefore, changed in any wise, they are serfs of the commune instead of being serfs of the landlord—and that is all. It is beyond doubt that from a material point of view serfage had its excellencies, and that the mir has preserved them; but it is needless to prove here that its advantages were far from compensating for its defects, since it was

this very fact which led to the act of emancipation, the true bearing of which we are now studying.

Theoretically, then, the peasant communities cannot escape the condemnation of public sentiment unless they abolish serfage. What shall we say if we examine the practical side?

I ask the reader in his kindness to imagine a Russian village set in a vast plain, touching the rest of the world only when the few Jewish traders come to it to take provisions in exchange for their wares. There each is the serf of all. If a peasant cultivate his field poorly the rest share the loss, hence there is a continual surveillance, and naturally it is routine which gets the advantage of initiative. Thus would it always be, even if the associated peasants were all of them upright—and that is not the case. As soon as a member of the association has succeeded in laying by anything, the others seem to thirst for it—and thirst in the literal sense of the word; for they insist that they will drink with him and he must pay for it. If he refuses, the peasant-mayor will readily find pretexts to lay fines upon him. If he undertake to escape the determination of his extortioners, Art. 713 stares him in the face and deportation is reserved for him.

Such is the actual operation when the peasant remains in the village; if he go to the city, not only will an enormous portion of his wages be snatched from him by his fellow peasants, but he must go alone, without his family; he will be only a sojourner there, as are, for example, the ten thousand cabmen of St. Petersburg. How will he conduct himself? How will his wife conduct herself while he is away from home? In truth, a great disillusion is in store for the observer. The mir does not vary much from the probable prototype of human society. We should be glad to find there in the midst of inevitable defects certain valuable characteristics that by analogy we might suppose had made better the life of our forefathers. In reality there is not a single point in which liberty and the appropriation of land would not be a thousand times rather to be desired. This institution of earlier ages has brought results such as these:

Thirty millions are serfs and are oppressed by bonds stronger than those which the edict of 1861 attempted to break.

All moral or intellectual progress is absolutely impossible in this mass of human beings.

The laborers in a great industry are by law condemned to be nothing more than nomads where they gain their bread, nor can they ever have a permanent home.

Every one of the thirty millions of debtors lives under the surveillance of the *haute police* and is liable to a sentence which the laws of France prescribe for those whom our courts have charged with infamy. Any day he may be called to a distant village, and forced to do work which he has forgotten how to perform. Indeed, he cannot succeed in escaping the call, except by abandoning that portion of his gains which might aid him in securing a means of industry.

Russia is a great country with a great people; but she will remain an alien in Europe until that hour in which her august sovereign of to-day shall realize that truth, the sole conception of which has rendered immortal the memory of his magnanimous father, and shall give to his thirty millions of serfs a liberty that shall no longer be apparent, a liberty that shall be real.

IV.

If the counselors by whom Alexander II was surrounded had sought for him glory in succeeding ages rather than the ephemeral applause of his contemporaries, they would have said to him :

“Sire, the generous heart of your majesty wishes to loose from thirty millions of your subjects the chains which bind them from the cradle to the grave and to tear down the barrier that separates them from other men. The time is not yet come. They would not know how to use the liberty, they would abuse it. If your Majesty would not make thirty millions of indigent persons, to another must be delegated the power which is taken from the nobility. We beseech your Majesty not to do this. A new authority,

whatever it be, would have all the severity and all the cruelty which your government has known how to repress while yet the progress of civilization could not check those evils in the *seigneurs*. Besides, this new-created power would receive a sort of consecration from the generous thought which guides your Majesty. We pray you, do not emancipate the serfs, rather make use of a power that continues integral to make them fit to be free, capable of using their liberty. We know that we ask your Majesty to renounce a great glory, the glory of receiving from the whole world the name of *Tsar liberateur*; but we know also that it is not an empty glory that your great heart seeks, but the welfare of your subjects and the greatness of your empire. Hereafter when your successor shall be able to proclaim the act which you will have prepared, which, in reality, you will have completed, History, who never forgets, will go back to the source of this great, grand deed and the descendants of the serfs of to-day will forever bless you for having cherished a veritable emancipation, the breaking of the chains of ignorance, of routine, and of poverty, instead of having deluded their fathers by a change of gaolers."

The emperor, Alexander II, did not free the serfs, but he wished to free them; he thought that he had freed them. The admiration of the world did not, then, deceive itself when it bowed before him. He deserved it the first of March, 1861. Alas! he deserved it still the first of March, 1881, that day in which his generosity made him the victim of the most ignoble of all political parties. He had escaped the first attempts of the assassins, but one of his attendants had been wounded. He imperiously ordered the carriage to be stopped, when it was the rapidity with which it moved that had saved his life; it is at the moment in which he stoops to give assistance to his injured officer that the fatal bomb comes and strikes him to the ground.

And dying thus, for having given to all sovereigns a bright example of compassion, was he not an hundred times the

greater man than if he had died upon the battle field, leading his squadrons? And with an expression of profound respect for his memory it is fitting to close this criticism of his work.

VICOMTE COMBES DE LESTRADE.

Chateau des Noues, Ouzouer sur Loire, (Loiret.) May 13, 1891.